

Al-Qaeda Announces an Islamic State in Syria

by [Aaron Y. Zelin \(/experts/aaron-y-zelin\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Aaron Y. Zelin \(/experts/aaron-y-zelin\)](#)

Aaron Y. Zelin is the Richard Borow Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy where his research focuses on Sunni Arab jihadi groups in North Africa and Syria as well as the trend of foreign fighting and online jihadism.



Brief Analysis

The open declaration of Jabhat al-Nusra's affiliation with al-Qaeda only reiterates the need for U.S. leadership in helping the mainstream rebels contain the jihadists.

Early Tuesday morning, Sheikh Abu Bakr al-Husseini al-Qurashi al-Baghdadi -- the leader of the Islamic State of Iraq, an al-Qaeda branch -- released an audio message announcing the extension of its "Islamic State" into al-Sham (the Levant), effectively bringing Syrian jihadist rebel group Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) into the fold. This comes on the heels of "al-Qaeda Central" leader Ayman al-Zawahiri releasing a video message two days ago calling for unification of the jihad in Syria. This is no coincidence -- rather, it highlights the continued relevance of al-Qaeda's central command. Although Baghdadi's announcement confirms what many already surmised and what the United States noted in its December designation of JN as a terrorist group, his words offer several important takeaways.

Baghdadi's audio message explains that al-Qaeda did not announce the connection to JN previously for two reasons: security concerns, and a desire for Syrians to get to know JN on their own terms and not be clouded by media "misrepresentations" ahead of time due to the stigma of association with al-Qaeda. This is in line with an overarching tactic al-Qaeda has used in various locales in the post-Arab uprising environment. In Yemen, for example, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's late sharia official Abu Zubayr Adil bin Abdullah al-Abab explained in April 2011 why the group was rebranding itself as "Ansar al-Sharia in Yemen": "[It] is what we use to introduce ourselves in areas where we work to tell people about our work and goals." Similarly, Tunisia and Libya have witnessed the establishment of Ansar al-Sharia groups that act locally but, at least at the leadership level, believe in al-Qaeda's global ideology.

More important, Baghdadi's message illustrates that al-Qaeda Central in Pakistan is still relevant to the global jihad that it originally called for in 1998. Although JN was not officially announced until late January 2012, evidence suggests that it was originally established in summer 2011. Abu Lokman, a senior JN commander in Aleppo,

explained to the BBC in January 2013 that he originally joined the group in its infancy six months prior to its first public video release. This would place JN's founding at the end of July 2011 -- a timeframe corroborated in interviews with other JN fighters who have spoken with Western and Arab media outlets.

Abu Lokman's date also coincides with Zawahiri's first video related to the Syrian uprising, released on July 27, 2011. In it, he supported the "Muslims in Bilad al-Sham, the land of *ribat*, jihad, glory, Arabism, and nobility." In the context of his latest announcement on Syria, this suggests that al-Qaeda Central had knowledge of -- and perhaps even ordered -- JN's establishment two years ago.

In the short term, the creation of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) is unlikely to have much effect on the Syrian uprising. JN has already been playing an integral role on the battlefield and, more important, in the governance of villages and parts of cities in northern and eastern Syria, in cooperation with other Salafist factions such as Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyah. The group's ability to provide security and basic needs (bread, fuel) to Syrian civilians, as well as reopen shops and restart bus services, has afforded it leeway even if the people are not naturally disposed to its ideology. In any case, locals have little alternative at this juncture -- the reason JN rose to prominence in the first place was because rebels from the mainstream Free Syrian Army failed to provide these necessary services. Instead, some factions looted, extorted, and taxed civilians beyond their means. In contrast, JN has sold items at below market cost and provided a level of efficiency through methodically organized city planning.

Nevertheless, the ISIS announcement could backfire in the medium-to-long term. While civilians appreciate JN's help with governance, more of them are showing signs of chafing under the group's imposition of strict Islamist beliefs. Residents in a number of cities have criticized JN for banning alcohol, forcing women to wear the *niqab* (full veil), and lashing men for fraternizing with women in the streets. Following Baghdadi's announcement, they might be even more inclined to view such measures as an outside imposition of jihadist imperialism within Syria. That said, so long as JN members are seen as fair arbiters when it comes to governance, their soft power is likely to go a long way in tamping down any large-scale backlash in the near term.

This illustrates the need for American leadership in the Syrian conflict, particularly with regard to helping non-Qaeda-aligned rebels contain the growth of JN and similar groups. Washington should also try to take advantage of cleavages within the rebellion and civilian population, since JN is outside the mainstream and more concerned with establishing a transnational caliphate than maintaining the Syrian state.

Aaron Y. Zelin is the Richard Borow fellow at The Washington Institute ❖

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